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## Words

# The Nordic concept of 'faellesskab'

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### Author's abstract

*The complex of cultural, political and societal affiliations, both in a historic and a contemporary perspective, is expressed by a special term in the Nordic languages, 'faellesskab', often with the addition of 'folkelig', as 'folkeligt faellesskab', where 'folkelig' means of the people.*

*No corresponding term exists in English.*

*For medical ethics the concept 'faellesskab', or whatever wording is chosen to serve the semantics of this term, is vital. In research ethics and clinical decision-making complex ethical analyses and normative evaluations are necessary. They cannot be based solely on moral relativism, whether being based on results of opinion polls or on a widespread 'every man minds his own business' concept.*

*'Faellesskab' possesses the necessary base of common values.*

The feeling of cultural, political and societal affiliation, both in a historic and a contemporary perspective has its own term in Nordic languages, 'faellesskab', sometimes for instance with the addition of 'folkelig' as 'folkeligt faellesskab', where 'folkelig' means of the people.

No corresponding term exists in English. *Solidarity* covers a stratified affiliation, sometimes approaching group egoism. *Cultural fellowship* is also narrow too. *Spirit* or *sense of community* is probably the closest translation, but it lacks the historical perspective. Further, *fellow feeling* again is more group-oriented than 'faellesskab'.

If an English neologism was acceptable, 'commonship' would cover. It would however also lack the historic connotation. 'Faellesskab' is an old term. Its modern meaning stems however, mostly from the mid-nineteenth century with the then prevalent trends of early democracy and breaking nationalism. In

Denmark the central figure was the vicar and poet N F S Grundtvig (1783–1872). The 'Folk High Schools' for ordinary people and the Danish primary school system were both based on the concept of 'faellesskab'. Even today this historical ideology has preserved a strong impact on politics, culture, education etc.

When analyzed today 'faellesskab' is probably silently re-defined by most Nordic citizens. Often the components of the term are considered so complex, and maybe even metaphysical in nature, that they escape visibility and recognition. But after some digging the constituents are still here: a common history, a co-responsibility for a common future, genetical and cultural similarities (fortunately mixed with necessary elements of cultural stimuli from outside, thus preventing stagnation and national self-sufficiency) and – probably most important – a common acknowledgement of fundamental human rights and their operational equivalents, forming the democratic society.

The need for 'faellesskab' has been more visible during the last decade. This visibility has further led to an analytic unmasking of the present prevailing trends towards moral relativism and mutual contractual relationships between citizens: 'If you accept my behaviour and lifestyle, I will do the same to you', not considering any underlying moral norms.

For medical ethics a concept of 'faellesskab' – or whatever wording is chosen to serve the semantics of this term – is vital. The complex ethical analyses and normative evaluations necessary in research ethics and clinical decision-making cannot be based solely on a moral relativism, whether it stems from the result of opinion polls or from a common 'every man minds his own business' concept.

'Faellesskab' needs a base of common values. It cannot exist in a pluralistic vacuum, outlined by legal boundaries and nothing else.

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### Key words

Faellesskab; commonship; sense of community; cultural fellowship.

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